Driveway Repair Options

Ok, so your driveway requires mowing, and walking to your front door in heels resembles a dance through a mine field. Your house is like most other houses in the Houston area that are 5 or more years old. The wood that used to be between each concrete slab is now half mulch or is just plain gone. What can you do about this?

If you measure the length of these gaps of your average 2-car driveway, you'll be surprised to find you have about 100 feet of gap will need to be taken care of. If you have a garage in the back, or a wide parking area, it can get well past 300 feet. Then there's the sidewalk we should probably take care of as well, unless the HOA will do that for you. That's a lot of empty space.

A trip to your local hardware store and a chat with the staff will reveal a few options. The first being replacing the rotten stuff with new stuff. Wood, that is. The most rot resistant would be the best. Redwood, cedar and pressure treated products are likely to be recommended. If your driveway is like most, you used to have '1x4' in these gaps. This wood is not actually one inch wide and four inches tall, but it's still referred to as 1x4, maybe for sentimental reasons. The original wood was anchored by being cast in place, and will also have some residual nails going into the slab. The new wood will need to fit into this same space, but if it's warped in the wrong direction, it can be difficult to keep it down. Spend some time to get straight pieces of wood. Cedar shims can be used to retain the wood into its new home, should it be a little under-size. Expect to pay around $40 to fill 100 ft of slab gaps, and buy extra to allow for the cut off ends should you wish to minimize the number of pieces installed. This method should be 'as good as new'; therefore expect the same life as the original wood, and the need for some weed control after the first season.

Next option is the stuff we see in commercial locations. It looks like a grey rubber that has been applied in the cracks. The consumer-equivalent substance is a concrete caulk available in 10 ounce tubes. These are the same size tubes for silicone, adhesives, and caulk you use around the house, so you may very well have a dispenser already. If you do not, low-cost dispensers are below $5. The big question is, how many tubes must you buy? Since each tube will cost $4 to $7, and you probably don't want to make too many trips to the store, a little math is in order. If the cracks you are filling are 'standard', that is, they were made by 1x4 lumber, they are only ¾ inch wide. If we try to fill the entire space, you will use a lot of material; since we only need to block water flowing through, a smaller area will do. To limit the depth of the caulk, purchase a foam noodle 'backer rod' which you push down to ¾ inch deep consistently along the gap. This will give a ¾ inch wide by ¾ inch deep fill at the top of each gap. With each ounce equivalent to 1.8 cubic inches, each tube will fill 32 linear inches. For your 'average' driveway of 100 ft of gaps you will need 37.5 tubes. If this sounds like too much squeezing and dispensing, electric and air-powered dispensers are also available for as little as $40. Your 'average' driveway with 100 ft of gap will cost from $150-$260 in caulk, $30 in backer rod, plus the dispenser of your choice. This should last at least as long as the wood being replaced, and will be better at keeping dirt and weeds out; consider this 'better than new'.

The last option is a new one. It is specifically intended for those 'average' ¾ inch gaps, and the rounded edges you will typically find on concrete driveways and sidewalks. Its name is 'Trim-A-Slab', and it is a rubber-like strip available in 50 ft long coils. It is easily pressed into the gaps between slabs, grabbing onto the side walls of the gap to keep itself in. The top of Trim-A-Slab is also a little bigger than the slab gap, so that it will stay just below the surface of the slab, staying in the area with the rounded edges. Trim-A-Slab cuts with garden shears, so it is a good do-it-yourself project, requiring very little installation skill. It comes in black or grey, and provides excellent weed control. The black is the 'low maintenance' option, as it will not show marks. The grey product will pick up tire marks, but can be cleaned easily with soap and water. Trim-A-Slab is priced at $75 for the 50 ft roll, so your 'average' driveway will require $150 of Trim-A-Slab. The product is guaranteed for 5 years, but as the materials used are the same as exterior window seals, it is likely to last substantially longer. This repair is 'better than new' and it is also the easiest of the three to install.

References

Pricing from Lowes® on 7/26/2010:

Pressure treated pine 1"x4"x12': $4.97 (note: intended for 'above ground use')
Quickrete backer rod, 20': $5.74
Quickrete filler 10 oz tube: $6.97

Pricing from the R&D Workshop on 7/26/2010:

Trim-A-Slab 50'roll: $75